

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 27, 2023 (Proper 16, Year A)
Matthew 16:13-20

The state highway department in Pennsylvania once set out to build a bridge working from both sides. When the workers reached the middle of the waterway, they had a problem. The two sides didn't MEET in the middle. Actually, they weren't even close. They were thirteen feet off. Albert Steinberg, writing some time ago in the Saturday Evening Post, went on to explain that each crew of workmen had used its own reference point. No wonder they didn't connect.

In that same article Steinberg tells about a small disc on the Meades Ranch in north central Kansas, where the thirty-ninth parallel from the Atlantic to the Pacific crosses the ninety-eighth meridian running from Canada to the Rio Grande. The National Oceanic Survey, a small federal agency, uses that scientifically recognized reference point on the Meades Ranch to locate the exact positions of every point in the United States.

So far, no mistakes have been made, and none are expected. All ocean liners and commercial planes come under the same survey. The government can build no dams or even launch a missile without this agency to tell it the exact location to the very inch. "Location by approximation," the article goes on to say, "can be costly and dangerous."

That's why there's so much chaos in our society today. Everyone's using their own reference point. It used to be that everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but the facts were indisputable; now people just make up facts to fit whatever point they're arguing. Things like this happen...

Show picture "Facts vs Opinions"

What we need is a universal reference point that we can say, "HERE. HERE is where we begin. THIS is our starting point."

Well, for Christians there IS a reference point – and that's Jesus. Christians aren't made by hotdishes, or fish symbols on their cars, or crosses on their walls, or even pushy preachers. The ONE thing that MAKES Christians WHO WE ARE is who JESUS is. JESUS IS Christianity.

If God had only given us a book, then we'd have the Bible, but we wouldn't be Christians. We'd be just another philosophy of life, or a system of ethical virtues. You know, other religions have love, and they have beliefs about the good and right and true. Even atheists can claim that. Almost every religion has some version of the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12). It's been said that the moral codes of the religions of the world are so similar, that if you locked a person in a room with the holy books of every religion, the person would die from boredom at the sheer sameness of them all. There's only ONE thing that sets Christianity apart, and that's the person for whom it's named, Jesus Christ.

Now, we can sympathize with those folks who look at Jesus and see only a noble teacher, or a great moral example, or even a wild-eyed revolutionary. After all, from the very beginning, who Jesus was and what he was about was far from self-evident.

Jesus looked at his disciples and said: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples tried to be nice and spared him what they had heard about him being a phony, a drunk, a rabble-rouser, or just plain nuts. Instead they shared only the most complimentary remarks: "Some say that you're John the Baptist; others say Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus is understood in so MANY ways. It's ALWAYS been that way.

You can speak of Jesus as a prophet, a holy man, a teacher, or a spiritual leader, and nobody will disagree. But speak of Him as the Son of God, divine, or God incarnate, and people will line up to argue with you.

A billion Muslims will say: "Prophet, yes. God, no!"

Jews scattered around the world will say: "Teacher, yes. Messiah, no!"

And a legion of people who CALL themselves Christians will say: "Exemplary man, yes. Divine, no!" And that seems to be ENOUGH for them. But to call Jesus just a teacher, or just a healer, or just a prophet treats him like a fraud.

C.S. Lewis, in his book "Mere Christianity," addresses these people by making the following statement about Jesus:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would NOT be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg-- or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. HE has not left that open to us."

That's one of my favorite quotes. It's very direct. Jesus was either the Son of God, as he claimed, or he was a liar and a lunatic. It's not enough to call him just a great teacher, even if he was the GREATEST of teachers.

Jesus asks another question. The first one was a question of knowledge, impersonal: "Who do PEOPLE say that the Son of Man is?" But THIS time, he gets PERSONAL: "Who do YOU say that I am?" THAT'S the question Jesus asks EVERY one of us: "Who do YOU say that I am?"

The scripture writers tried, each in their own way, to answer that question. They gave Jesus numerous titles. There's a video clip I'd like to show you. It lists 100 names of Jesus. As you see each name, reflect on what that name means, what it says ABOUT Jesus.

Watch video "100 names of Jesus"

And that's not ALL of the names the Bible GIVES Jesus. Each of them says something different about who Jesus is. But those names were attempts by OTHER people. Jesus is more concerned with YOUR answer than theirs.

Luther wrote: "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for you."

I'll say that again: "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for you." "FOR YOU." As in "the body of Christ given FOR you," and "the blood of Christ shed FOR you." Everything Jesus was and did and said was to give to the life of the world, and THAT INCLUDES EACH and EVERY ONE of YOU.

MOST of us live our day to day LIVES like our faith means NOTHING to us, like Jesus is nobody – except maybe on Sunday. But Christianity isn't a set of ideas or ideals that we can use one day and put away for the rest of the week; our faith is a PERSON, it's a way of LIFE, a way of walking WITH Jesus. It's a RELATIONSHIP. We love God because God first loved us, in Christ.

And that relationship is what gets us through the day. It's what gives us HOPE when we don't know what to do, when our world is crashing down around us, or when people we love are dying. It's what MAKES life worth LIVING.

Faith like that is a gift from God. God inspired Peter to say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And that confession, that relationship, that FAITH is the rock the church was built on. It's our reference point, our lighthouse, our beacon in the night.

The oldest creed of the church, probably spoken by the disciples themselves and recorded in scripture, was simply THREE words – JESUS IS LORD. It's the ONE thing that MAKES a person a Christian. Jesus Christ IS Christianity. Our faith isn't a set of ideas; it's a person.

Luther hit the nail right on the head. "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for you." What has Jesus done in YOUR life? What DIFFERENCE does KNOWING Jesus MAKE to you? Who do YOU say he is? Who is Jesus for YOU? Amen.